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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women

Statement submitted by World Young Women's Christian Association, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 26 July 1996.

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Importance of including issues affecting older women in United Nations agendas

It is the view of the World Young Women's Christian Association (World YWCA) that the situation of older women is absolutely relevant to the agenda of conferences and conventions dealing with women's issues and should be integrated in any recommendation or statement.

The status of older women has long been of concern to the World YWCA. For example, as long ago as 1959 the World YWCA Council, meeting at Cuernavaca, Mexico, called for its member associations to strive to influence public opinion and employers and help to eliminate discriminatory practices in relation to the placement and employment of older women. Unfortunately, even today, older women face discriminatory practices in the workplace. The World YWCA urged that the problems of promotion possibilities, reassignment, age limits and pensions be given careful consideration [illegible] that YWCAs provide adequate vocational guidance and training services.

National YWCAs from countries with [illegible] differing economic situations continue [illegible] programmes for their rapidly growing population of older people. They include affordable, sunrise housing and residential care, indispensable preventive community support, rehabilitative services, household assistance, recreational activities, health care, spiritual and social activities. Among member associations involved are the YWCAs of Hong Kong, China; Malaysia; Poland; Singapore; Taiwan, Province of China; the United States of America; Canada; and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

YWCAs in Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Egypt have developed badly needed programmes in refugee camps, where many older women have been adversely affected by the ravages of war and the loss of family members, homes and financial support.

The World YWCA would like to point out that in many developing countries the notion of retirement simply doesn't exist. In those countries, many women have never had a permanent job and are forced to develop their own strategies merely to survive.

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Another factor in the lives of many older women is the importance of maintaining strong family support systems, which in many parts of the world have historically provided the main resource on which the older person may depend.

As the world passes into the new millennium, we are faced with the double-edged sword of a projected population that will consist, in many countries, of 33 per cent older people and 50 per cent young people. So, we are going to be left with very young and very old and relatively few people in the middle who are the ones, the caregivers, who normally support the other two. Although YWCA programmes are generally focused on the young, who are the leaders of the future, we believe it is time to respect and address the needs of the older women in our society and to recognize and acknowledge the value of their wisdom and the life experiences that they contribute to the home, the workplace and the community. The women's organizations in the United Nations/NGO community, who are eminently suited to take on this task, have an incentive provided by the Fourth World Conference on Women to do so.

The World Young Women's Christian Association would like to express its appreciation for the opportunity to present this statement.